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WORKING WITH ABORIGINAL PEOPLE

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Ruth Phillips, PhD
Carleton University's
Canada Research Chair
in Modern Culture

Oronhyatekha wearing the outfit made for his presentation to the Prince of Wales in 1860, photographed by Hills & Saunders, Oxford, 1862. Private collection.

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Research snapshot

Purpose

To explore visual and material culture as aspects of larger processes of culture contact and colonization to develop new, postcolonial approaches to museological and academic representations of First Nations art.

Scope

To study the visual and material culture of the First Nations peoples of the Great Lakes region of North America.

Thesis

Aboriginal visual and material culture can provide unique evidence both of the systemic nature of indigenous knowledge and of patterns of cultural contact between indigenous peoples and newcomers.

Outcome

A greater understanding of material culture as a site of cross-cultural interaction, and, specifically, a database of historic visual and textual sources for the study of Great Lakes visual culture and communicative practices.

Selected publications

- Phillips, R. *Trading Identities: The Souvenir in Native North American Art from the Northeast, 1700-1900*, Seattle: University of Washington Press. 1998
- Phillips, R. and Janet Catherine Berlo. *Native North American Art*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998

Grad student projects

Anne de Stecher, second year,
Master's of Art History,
*Subjugation and autonomy:
images of Aboriginal women,
imagery of Aboriginal women.*

Dr. Heidi Bohaker, first year,
SSHRC post-doctoral fellow,
*Anishinaabe family and
community histories among iconic
imagery on treaty documents.*

Honours

- 2004-2008 President, Comité Internationale de l'histoire de l'Art
- 2003 Fellow, Clark Art Institute
- 2001 British Academy Fellowship

We have contact: exploring the meaning of First Nations art

A picture says a thousand words. This familiar saying reminds us that art is a powerful form of non-verbal communication that conveys complex messages at a glance. According to art historian Ruth Phillips, art objects communicate meaningful insights into the interaction between cultures.

Phillips is the Tier I Canada Research Chair in Modern Culture at Carleton University. Since the 1970s, she has explored the meaning of Aboriginal visual and material culture (including works from rock paintings to clothing) of the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence regions who were the first to come in contact with Europeans. She believes that this art reveals important aspects of the relationship between these peoples and European newcomers from the 17th through to the 20th centuries.

"First Nations peoples had pressing political issues related to maintaining their land and identity against the threat of European colonization," she explains. "We can learn more about how they tried to resolve these problems by examining the cultural artifacts they made as well as the context in which these objects were produced—their art is a window onto history from their perspective."

A FINE SUIT OF CLOTHES

Look no further than the Prince of Wales' royal visit to the colony of Canada in 1860 to see how cultural artefacts can reflect the complex interaction between Aboriginals and Europeans at this time.

During the 19th century, white settlement of the Great Lakes region pushed the First Nations peoples off land they had occupied for thousands of years, in violation of the terms of existing land treaties. When the Prince arrived in Brantford, Ontario many people greeted him including delegates from the Six Nations Iroquois who were there to petition his help in ensuring that land treaty promises made by the crown were kept by the Canadian government. In this party was a man called Oronhyatekha who wore a suit consisting of a velvet tunic, leggings, and a headdress. Although the cut of the garment was native, the fabric was velvet and decorated with

Victorian-style beadwork. The Aboriginal seamstresses who made the suit were in frequent contact with British women and had become interested in integrating European needlework techniques into the construction of their traditional clothing.

Phillips points out that this cultural mixing neatly summarizes the struggle faced by First Nations peoples. They were resisting the tidal wave of displacement and assimilation by retaining essential parts of their identity, as seen in the cut of the tunic and the headdress. Simultaneously, they were also interested in learning about and even borrowing from the new European society, as reflected by the beadwork.

RECLAIMING THE PAST

For Phillips, studies of cultural contact in Canada must also consider how collecting institutions have catalogued, interpreted, and displayed First Nations art.

Two of the biggest challenges she has identified are creating access to objects and documents relevant to Great Lakes Aboriginal peoples scattered in archives and museums around the world, and integrating Aboriginal knowledge about them that is missing from the documentation.

To make this material more accessible, Phillips and 29 other researchers from universities, museums, and aboriginal communities in Europe and North America have formed The Great Lakes Alliance for The Study of Aboriginal Art and Culture.

"Our goal is to produce a multimedia digital repository and search engine. By uniting the cultural traditions of the region under one roof, we hope to promote the interrelationship of artefacts, documents, language and oral traditions and add back the Aboriginal voice."



"Aboriginal art is a window into history from their perspective."

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